

## Best Practices from the CCTA: Centers Collaborative for Technical Assistance

The National Science Foundation's Advanced Technological Education (NSF ATE) program focuses on the education of technicians for the high-tech fields that drive the nation's economy. The faculty members of community colleges, which are the main source of technician education in the United States, have leadership roles in the initiatives that involve partnerships with industry and other educators. Since 1994, NSF ATE initiatives have developed a wide-range of innovations to serve students better and inform educators.

A group NSF ATE centers formed the Centers Collaborative for Technical Assistance (CCTA) in response to a Department of Labor request to NSF for technical assistance services to recipients of Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants. The centers are National Center for Convergence Technology (CTC), South Carolina ATE National Resource Center (SCATE), Florida Advanced Technological Education Center (FLATE) and Bio-Link National Center (Bio-Link). The identification and sharing of NSF ATE best practices are among the services CCTA offers.

# STRATEGIES FOR TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Effective communication is at the heart of the strategies that CCTA partners use to work efficiently on grant-funded projects to avoid problems and to address challenges when they occur. To build the collaborative spirit among participants, CCTA encourages project leaders to schedule periodic web conferences, hold in-person meetings, use memoranda of understanding, and share data on digital dashboards. These tools, which are described in this handout, help maintain strong connections between leaders at each partner institution as well as among the financial and program personnel at each location. It is essential that all participants understand the funders' expectations, the project's goals, and the steps and timelines for achieving the intended outcomes. CCTA partners have found that when project leaders communicate effectively and articulate how challenges can be used as opportunities, it propels progress and further builds collaboration.

## FREQUENT COMMUNICATION BUILDS COLLABORATION

Frequent communication via group web conferences, one-on-one phone calls, and face-to-face meetings are essential to facilitate a sense of collaboration among the project team. Communicating in multiple ways will help sustain participants' commitment to the project's goals. Web conferences should be scheduled frequently enough to keep participants on track with their work and informed about what other team members are doing. CCTA recommends biweekly teleconferences for the project leads at the partner colleges. The overall project leader should budget his or her time for individual calls as needed with program and finance personnel.

To sustain communication among the project's team members

- schedule periodic teleconference calls;
- share agendas in advance of meetings;
- post discussion summaries;
- utilize file-sharing software;
- meet in person annually; and
- plan site visits by the project leader.

### TIP: Develop a "data dictionary" to define what acronyms and terms mean within the project.

Share this dictionary with all stakeholders and participants to facilitate efficient project operations, uniform collection of data, and clear analyses of project outcomes.



## GREAT RESOURCES TO HELP OVERCOME CHALLENGES

- evaluators' formative assessments
- funders' monitoring reports
- subject-matter experts' advice
- granting agency technical assistance

# USE MOUs TO KEEP MULTI-COLLEGE PROJECTS ON TRACK

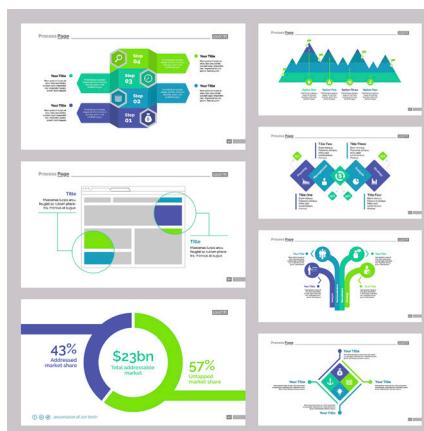
Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) are particularly useful when a grant-funded project involves multiple colleges. The components of MoUs include

- work statements;
- timelines;
- budgets;
- participation expectations for web conferences and other meetings; and
- specifications for activity and financial reports.

Tailoring the details for each MOU to reflect the particular role of each partner college helps eliminate misunderstandings. MOUs also provide a roadmap for project work to continue if there are personnel changes within the project or at the partner colleges. Because each partner college will likely have different requirements for such legally binding contracts, project leaders need to set aside the time and resources necessary to finalize MOUs as quickly as possible at the beginning of the project.

## MAXIMIZE DASHBOARD IMPACT

- Display only the most important information that aligns with project goals to prevent information overload.
- Keep the dashboard “evergreen” by updating its elements frequently.
- Incorporate the dashboard in presentations to engage stakeholders and diverse audiences.
- View CCTA’s webinar “Creating Dashboards For Grants Development And Management” for more tips. <http://bit.ly/creatingdashboards>



“Plan well, but be extremely flexible.”

**MARIANNE KRISMER**  
NATIONAL DIRECTOR, HEALTH PROFESSIONS  
PATHWAY TAACCCT CONSORTIUM

“Consortia are especially successful when they have at least one champion at each partner college.”

**JOHN SANDS**

DIRECTOR, NATIONAL CENTER FOR SYSTEMS SECURITY AND INFORMATION ASSURANCE

**TIP: Develop a network among people who are leading similar grant-funded projects.**

Meet them at conferences; call them to introduce yourself and your project. Utilize this human network to troubleshoot issues.

## STEPS TO DEVELOP ENGAGING DASHBOARDS

A project’s digital dashboard displays quantitative information about major activities and outcomes at a glance. To create a dynamic dashboard follow these steps:

Gather

- data & trends,
- metrics & measures, or
- key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned to project goals.

Then

- identify the relationships you wish to display;
- place data in Excel or CSV files to facilitate its visualization using software tools;
- select visualizations that convey key data points; and
- label charts to convey key data points succinctly.

# CCTA

## CENTERS COLLABORATIVE FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

For more information, contact:

Christina Titus, Program Director at [ctitus@collin.edu](mailto:ctitus@collin.edu) or 972.377.1786  
Ann Beheler, PI at [abehler@collin.edu](mailto:abehler@collin.edu) or 972.377.1649

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